

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 460

CS 213 865

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TITLE Beyond Politeness: Flaming and the Realm of the Violent.  
PUB DATE Mar 93  
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).  
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Communication; Classroom Environment; College Students; \*Electronic Mail; Higher Education; \*Language Usage; \*Student Behavior; Student Subcultures; Teacher Behavior; \*Teacher Student Relationship  
IDENTIFIERS Communication Behavior; Computer Mediated Communication; \*Flaming (Computer Mediated Communication)

## ABSTRACT

Although "flaming" (language and behavior considered outrageous in a classroom context) is a rupture of teacher authority, it can be used in the classroom as a viable pedagogical tool. A student in a basic literature course read a long and sexually explicit narrative in rhymed couplets. The rupture in the normal classroom environment caused by the student's poem is analogous to the rupture between computer users and flammers. In another class, the students were discussing homophobia, sexism, and misogyny over a computer network using graffiti collected by the students as a text. Flammers began to overload the session and dominate the computer-mediated discussion. The teacher ended the class early but spent the next 3 days using transcripts of the "flame" to discuss the exact language the flammers used. Flaming springs forth from the anxieties and fears of students: it lacks forethought and craft but it is the students' own language. Perhaps teachers can use students' commitment to their own language and ideas to teach them the power of rhetoric. Flaming can bring a range and a kind of a language into classrooms that may otherwise be absent. Teachers should consider ways to use the material generated by a flame when it does occur.  
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# Beyond Politeness: Flaming and the Realm of the Violent

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## Beyond Politeness: Flaming and the Realm of the Violent

Keith Dorwick

To begin with, I'd like to apologize for not being with you in person, and would like to thank my colleague, Randy Smith, for agreeing to present this paper in my absence. I'd also like to shift topics a little bit by emphasizing flaming, the spontaneous creation of homophobic, racist and misogynist language during electronic communication, over e-mail itself as the title of my paper in the program would indicate. I'll take one of my examples from a non-electronic classroom discussion, which I will present as an example of how a phenomenon analogous to flaming can occur in a classroom occupied by individuals not yet fully assimilated into the academy. My other example will come from a Daedalus Interchange session that got wildly out of control. For both of these, I will attempt to explain the presence of language and behavior we define as "outrageous" in our classrooms as a rupture in teacher authority, and then conclude with some very tentative ideas of how we can use flaming in our classrooms as a viable pedagogical tool.

I need to start by telling you what kind of paper this is not: this is not an analysis of a rigorous and empirical study following the flaming generated by 1000 students over a 7-year period. I only wish I had had the funding to be able to do that kind of project! Instead, I see this not so much as a series of answers as a series of questions I would like to raise or even, if you would, as stories I want to tell. That is how I propose to begin: with a couple of stories from my own experience in which the boundaries between teacher and student and between proper and improper

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behavior broke down to the benefit of the class. I was teaching our basic course in literature (the ubiquitous **Understanding Literature**) for the first time. One of my students in that class, G., told me that he had barely made it through high school and had been accepted at my university as a provisional student. He also told me that he didn't feel as if he fit in, and that he just never knew what people wanted from him. What's more, he said, none of "the stuff we had to read" had anything to do with him. Well, I had a brainstorm -- I decided to help G. openly question the authority of the writer in our culture. I asked students in the class to bring in their own writing so we could analyze it in the same way we analyze Yeats or Milton. And G. brought in his own poem: it turned out to be a very long sexual narrative in rhymed couplets. At first, it was funny, but as it went on and on and got yet more and more graphic, the tension in the class began to build: the women in the class began to look to me, the teacher, to break into G.'s reading and to stop him. I was caught between G.'s rights as a student and the need of the rest of the students to silence him. There was a real rupture between the normative experience of the classroom and the behavior allowed by our pedagogy, and between G.'s own experiences and interpretations of that classroom experience. G. used the leveling of authority I had created to meet his own needs as a student through what we might characterize as "disgusting" or disruptive behavior. I would propose that, in a very real sense, this rupture is the analog of the rupture between the users of a computer network or classroom and those users who flame, who transcend or simply ignore the conventions that are being developed for electronic communication.

This leads me to my second story: a few years ago, a colleague of mine, K., was holding a class in a Daedalus-equipped classroom. She had set up the session as an anonymous session (the three options available are user names, pseudonymous and anonymous). K. had had her students collect graffiti from the various washrooms around campus and was using the graffiti as her text for a discussion of sexism, misogyny and homophobia. I was monitoring the session as network administrator, and noticed that things were quickly getting out of hand: several of the students caught on to the way the system worked quicker than the other students in the class and began flaming. At first, it was fairly mild, but soon became a concerted attack on my colleague including speculations concerning her sexuality and even attacks on the personal appearance of some of the members of the class. In a few moments, what could have been a very serious discussion of the ways in which we encode sexism in our society became an electronic brawl. My colleague ended the class early, dismissed her students and came to my office to talk through what had occurred.

I think there are several factors to note here: first, K. was attacked as a perceived lesbian. In doing so, her male students were attempting to marginalize her. In their world, calling her a lesbian made her doubly powerless. Of course, teachers always have a great deal of power in the classroom, but in our society, women may find that the dynamics of the classroom temporarily offset the power inherent in the role of the teacher. However, I suspect that, in the case of flaming, computer experience may be even more telling than gender: students may understand how to manipulate the system better than the teacher. In K.'s case, the students

who were doing the flaming learned how to send messages in interchange faster than the students who were trying to keep the discussion centered on the topic. As the flammers gained confidence in their ability to control the session, they began to overload the session and to take over. In this particular instance, K. was just learning the system herself -- she was not quick to determine that a flame was starting and therefore did not make a move to stop the flammers until it was far too late to do so short of ending class itself that day. In the same way that G. took advantage of my inability to predict all possible outcomes of my simple request to "read our own writing" for his purposes, so K.'s students used the gap between their knowledge of the technology under their control and the knowledge held by other members of the class to create a rupture in normative classroom behavior.

Now, so far, it would appear that I am arguing against flaming and against the kind of rupture in classroom norms characterized by flaming, but, at the very least, I would like to problematize the issue. To begin with, the First Amendment protects students who flame except (very roughly speaking) where they cross into obscenity (whatever that means and however that is defined); as a profession too often accused of being overly P.C., we must always continue to struggle with the demands on our pedagogy created by the preservation of students' rights and not find ourselves stifling free speech in the name of ending oppression. Though we may be distressed by what we hear coming from our student's mouths (or e-mail messages), nonetheless, we must, with Voltaire, "preserve to the death [their] right to say it."

Further, what one flamer says (or types on a screen) may be what another student is thinking but is afraid to express. The diatribes of the flamers may not be minority opinion at all, but the secretly held opinions of 95% of the students in any given classroom. If so, flaming may be the only route open for those of us who teach in fully politicized classrooms to bring these ideas into the open for discussion, elaboration, modification and consensus -- if, of course, consensus is either possible or even desirable. In any case, students come to the university, whether they know it or not, to be exposed to a variety of opinions and ideas. In this model, flaming becomes not simply a classroom disruption (though it is that also), but additionally a mode of persuasion that, potentially ugly and upsetting as it may be, nonetheless demands a hearing. Students who flame, even anonymously, are setting forth a system of beliefs: they may these beliefs with a tenacity that belies the all-too-common stereotype of students as apathetic creatures without a single idea in their heads. Admittedly, the very nature of flaming might preclude **reasoned** thought -- but a flame could operate as the starting point of a discussion of gays in the military and not as the end of it.

Of course, whether or not a teacher can use flaming when and if it occurs is dependent on the teacher's attitude towards highly politicized material in the classroom, for flaming by its nature does not directly concern itself with writing as writing, with modes of discourses and methods of persuasion, least of all with concerns about audience! For whatever reasons, flaming seems to center on highly charged, highly politicized material, offered in a highly emotional manner. The debate concerning the nature of our classrooms and the content of what we teach

continues to rage across the academy and will no doubt continue to do so. Flaming is at the heart of this issue -- those in the profession who would argue that discussions of religion and politics or homosexuality and feminism have no place in our classrooms no doubt find flaming absolutely intolerable. How can flaming appear to those who would limit classroom discussion to Aristotle and to the use of comma, to matters of writing only, as anything but an interruption and a distraction?

But I cannot ignore flaming: it seems to spring forth from the anxieties and fears of our students. This is especially true as many of them confront being away from home and meeting people who are not members of their own known communities. The university, for our freshman at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is indeed a brave new world for them, but it is also the source of much tension as students from all white bedroom communities in the suburbs of Chicago meet students from Haiti for the first time, or as Latinos and Latinas from Pilsen meet Japanese students struggling to learn English in our ESL programs, as straight students meet openly gay and lesbian people for the first time in their lives. Those of us who do teach an openly politicized class may have an obligation to our flammers. After all, even if they are not following class rules and meeting assignments, they are in the process of creating a language and a text. In many ways, of course, flammers have not thought through their positions, and their language is clumsy and messy. Flaming lacks forethought and craft but it is the students' own language: perhaps we can use their commitment to their language and ideas to teach them the power of rhetoric. Additionally, as I mentioned above, flaming brings in a range of opinion that most students would be afraid to claim as their own: we may

not have any other way of getting to this material. By doing so, we vastly increase the range of perspectives available for consideration and discussion. There is no need for **resolution** of the multiple perspectives opened up by flaming and subsequent discussion and I do not believe that flammers need to learn that they are now nice liberal men and women who have learned to love minorities and fight racism: that vision of a classroom is as oppressive as that in which the teacher automatically forbids political discussion. Instead, I see a classroom in which the class as a whole deals with the material generated by the flamer as part of that which comprises our society. For better or worse, homophobia, racism and sexism are part of who we are, and students, especially minority students, must learn this.

All right then. If I have convinced you at all that flaming might be valuable and useful if handled properly, how can teachers use flaming in their pedagogy? First, there is little that can be done during a session. My experience teaching in a Daedalus equipped classroom and observing many sessions shows me that flaming is somewhat delicate: most really extended flames have occurred in highly charged situations in which the flammers were fairly conversant with the technology and the teacher was not. Colleagues of mine at last years' 4C's noted that flaming is a problem that seems to disappear as the teacher gains experience: we see the symptoms of an impending flame and move to end it before it can begin. It seems that any action taken during a flame simply ends it.

However, there are rich possibilities for direction after the session in which the flaming has occurred has ended. My colleague, K., had to end her

class early and send students home, but the next day, she came in with transcripts of the session and of the flame, and spent the next three class sessions discussing the exact language the flammers had used, why it was problematic, and for whom. Interestingly, the flammers identified themselves during the discussions as such and volunteered what it felt like to be involved in a flame, how they had gotten caught up in it, and how it seemed to build on itself, generating its own power as it went. From there, it was easy to move to discussions of the power of language itself.

It would have been easy for K. to ignore what had happened, to treat it as a technological glitch that ruined a class session, but instead she transformed it into a discussion of the very material -- sexism and homophobia -- that she had intended to teach.

I would propose that we continue our research and our exploration of flaming as a phenomenon that brings a range and a kind of language into our classrooms that may otherwise be absent, and that we consider ways to use the material generated by a flame when it does occur. Certainly, we should not simply dismiss flaming as a nuisance and an interruption: to do so is to risk closing a door on language that may not be available to classroom discussions in any other way. Perhaps we can learn to see flaming as both enriching and destructive and learn how to transform it from one state to another. Thank you!